SALVATION IS A KIND OF SEEING

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If a preacher never spoke of salvation in Christ in a congregation of the liberal, mainline traditions of the Protestant church in the West, few would notice or care. This lack of concern for a central promise of the gospels is rooted in a handful of ideas that have so penetrated western culture that religious and secular people often believe similar things about salvation, which they take to be a synonym for life after death. The first common belief is that life after death is in store for all and that it will be good, except, of course, for Hitler. The prevalence of this belief makes a preacher's omission of the question of salvation unremarkable. After all, when students think they have passed their final exams, how many are still interested in the questions?

A second, correlated belief is that life after death is the reward for reasonably good behavior. Holding to this belief, an uneasy conscience quiets itself by measuring itself against classes of criminals and reprobates, which gives a sense of moral equivalence with the average man. These two ideas focus softly on God as a fount of love whose very nature would not permit him to destroy his creatures. Even as some accept their complicity in wrongs of personal or even national character, they do not believe these wrongs would put their salvation in question. The idea that "Jesus died for me" is not absent from the mind of believers, either. Far from being a *skandalon*, however, the symbol of Jesus' crucifixion functions as a redundant support beam in the given structure of God's love and universal salvation. In sum, the decisive factor in salvation is not thought to be the free gift of God but entitlement to whatever goods are being passed out—if one has behaved like the average person. Serious preachers of the gospel hardly subscribe to this primitive and naturalistic theory, but those who believe it can barely hear a contrary teaching. They therefore do not notice if *nothing* is said on the subject.

A third reason that preachers leave the subject of salvation on the shelf, undelivered, is the widespread rejection of the prospect of life after death in a heaven where halos and earnest angels provide the sole entertainments for all eternity. This rejection of salvation's presumed conditions is mostly a secularist's dismissal of what he supposes are the childish fantasies of the religious. It is rooted, however, in a much more significant belief shared widely in and out of educated, liberal church traditions, namely, that speculation about the future is futile, if not positively wrong, and only the present is real. If a preacher cannot say how salvation pertains to the present lives of listeners, these will not long be listeners. Unfortunately, however, where liberalism is silent, literalism shouts. When the televised distortions of Christian salvation blare into the living room, the people whom the serious theological traditions might most help are left to wrestle with their notions alone.

A sounder approach for the teaching ministries of the church would be, first, to acknowledge that neither Scripture nor any other texts or voices can function as authoritative accounts of the nature of personal existence after death. Salvation in Christ ought never be reduced to speculation about future conditions. Second, every serious believer can be asked to become aware of and take responsibility for the effects her beliefs and speculations have on her own behavior. If these tasks of religious psychology are taken in hand, then the preacher has an opening to bring doctrines of the hope of salvation into contact with practices of change and transformation, while leaving aside theories life after death. Salvation is a promise intended to have consequences of the highest possible good for both individuals and communities. "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." (Jer 29.11)

This paper outlines an approach to salvation in Christ that can get a hearing from people who have no background in the faith, who do not assume that the church has more-valid truth claims than

have other spiritual teachers or traditions, and who are often not aware of the criteria and methods they use to compare truth claims. It is written also in mind of those many within the church who need to hear the heart of the Christian promise expressed without arcane doctrinal presuppositions about the nature of God or Christ Jesus. Salvation, according to this argument, is a symbol of the present experience of divine revelation that joins the meaning of the past and the future in the dynamic of love. To explain how a symbol may function with such healing power, the paper will first outline a philosophy of human knowledge and a philosophy of the agency of God.

What did Jesus Christ do for us? To meet the potential hearers identified above with respect for their personality and freedom, an answer to this question cannot be drawn from the lexicon of church doctrines. Before the modern period, people in the West mostly deferred to Scripture or ecclesiastical tradition as sufficient authorities for knowing the person and work of Jesus Christ. At least since Kant, however, western thought about how knowledge is possible has acknowledged the lonely monarchy of each knower. Each is responsible for the reality she commits herself to. If she says God graced her to see or believe or do this or that, it is she who makes the decree; she is responsible. If a hundred or a million agree with her claim of God's help and saving action within herself, or within history itself, that plurality of agreement does not make their claim true—unless "true" be defined as "what my group agrees to." The fact that millions consider the Bible the primary guide to understanding reality still provides no alchemy to turn the texts into bare facts. On earth, no authority exists above the knower's mind to tell the knower what he knows. Here, everything is interpretation. This is the modern predicament. Now, a large proportion of the population of the West has not permitted this loss of foundational authority to register in their awareness; their worldview is called "pre-modern" because a large proportion of the westernized cultures have experienced and accepted the loss of immediate authorities or absolutes. We will argue that the waking of millions upon millions of people to the fact of a certain inalienable freedom in their own consciousness may best be understood as an unfolding of, or a revelation of, the will of God. One way to express what Jesus Christ did for us is to say that he wakes us from sleep.

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer
> Things fall apart,; the center cannot hold.
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.[1]

The fact that the self-aware individual does not pretend to anchor his believing to any foundation—neither to the Bible or the church or any other system—does not prove that his believing amounts to merely subjective formulations having no correspondence to infinite, divine reality. Rather, the acknowledgment that believing is a rational decision based in experience but without external proofs situates the believer squarely inside the human predicament: to be human is to be limited in the power to see and to understand, and limited in the power to heal one's anxiety and wounded nature, and incapable of saving herself. This experience of limitation, as Tillich argued, is the ground of all religious quests and questions, though not of the religious answers. However complete or complex a theology of salvation may be, it must at least show how for an individual the conditions of ambiguity, imperfection, and finitude are met by the symbol of Christ in such a way that these conditions are transcended in concrete experience through a cooperation of personal will.

How can we know anything about God or God's relationship to us in our predicament? Does not the fact of our fallible knowledge render suspect any theory of relationship with the

eternal? S*uspect*, yes—but this, in the same sense that a scientist's hypothesis is suspect, that is, capable of being proved false by testing in experience. To be suspicious with regard to thought about God does not deny the possibility of good answers. It only means that all talk about God is provisional, and *subject to falsification and improvement by experiment.* So: are there any "facts" about the God-idea that might help open the mind to the possibility that God is for us? ("Factuality" here refers to the common experience that with respect to much perceptible data, *any* two reasonable observers can agree in their descriptions of "factual" phenomena.) Is God (or Christ? or salvation?) available to experience as a fact in this sense?

Of course not. The Bible itself records warnings against the error of taking our perceptions of God as mere fact. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD." (Isa 55.8) According to John's witness, Jesus wants people to understand that data about himself are not facts. "If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true." (5.31) When Peter tells Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," Jesus does not approve Peter's fact-finding skill. Rather, he calls Peter *blessed*. "Blessed are you, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." (Mat 16:16-17) In Calvin's doctrine of total depravity, the Reformed tradition was poised to connect Christian faith to acceptance that constructions of reality, including theological claims derived from the scriptures, are subject to error and ignorance. However, Calvinism blenched from the task, and reverted to treating the words of scripture as reports of mere facts, ignoring Calvin's caveat, "that we have no great certainty of the Word itself, until it be confirmed by the testimony of the Spirit." (Institutes I.9.3)

Christian teachers can press the case against fact-based, notional religion much harder than they do. Even before approaching the question of how one might know Christ, Christian teaching needs to clarify for hearers that even the existence of God is not a fact; God does not simply "exist." The word derives from Greek εξ-ιςτημι, (ex-istemi) meaning "to stand out" as a figure stands out from a ground. To be perceived by a knower, an object must "ex-ist" over against a ground which is distinct from the object; a subject-object duality must be present to the mind of the knower. However, if "God" is perceived as an object by a human subject, then the human is external to this "God," who is also external and in some sense inferior to the ground against which he stands as a perceivable figure. These conditions render the "God" a god.

Many religious adherents do imagine God as an agent exclusively outside of themselves, capable of doing things for or to them, according to divine pleasure or wrath, much like a super-powerful parent. Indeed, the practices and thought patterns in the piety of the masses seem to hold a picture of just such an objectively existing God. Many cultured despisers of religion think that such is the God on the minds of all believers. In *The Problem of God in Modern Thought*, Philip Clayton uses the thought of Johann Fichte (1762-1814) to summarize early modern progress in the critique of traditional theism.

> Fichte's . . . argument—the one that launched the Atheism Dispute—is meant to show that "the concept of God, understood as a particular substance, is impossible and self-contradictory." The notion of substance is too passive to serve as the foundation for the primary definition of God. "Substance" means "necessarily an entity which exists in a sensible fashion, in space and time"– and hence, a being that would contradict the essential nature of the infinite.[2]

Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) argued that such a God is an extrapolation from human virtues, projected on an imaginary divine object. Freud took this further to propose that the construction of God arises from a split within egoic consciousness that projects idealized needs for goodness and power onto the superego and dissociates them from the self by raising them to an imaginative cosmic

dimension, while introjecting feelings of guilt on lower elements of the ego, called the id. For many educated westerners, these criticisms, along with thousands of points of information from the sciences, have seemed to reduce the probability of the existence of God near to zero. After all, these atheists were correct to pronounce this god of traditional theism dead. But they and their followers have been looking on the cosmos through a terribly distorted lens, for they have assumed that the God of the Western religious traditions was to be understood (and discarded) precisely as a factual error. They have no grasp of what Friedrich Schelling (1775-1854) called "true theism." The following summary of Schelling's ideas is also from Philip Clayton.

> Schelling [made a] distinction among theism, pantheism, and monotheism. Theism is the view that sets God up in opposition to the world. . . . [I]ts God is in effect a divinization of the human subject and thus becomes vulnerable to Feuerbach's criticism that theistic language projects human attributes onto the Divine. Pantheism in its strict sense is Spinozism: There Is Only the All, and everything that exists is contained within it. Unfortunately, pantheism can understand this All only as object rather than as subject, since there is no Other in relation to which it could emerge as subject. The most adequate position is what Schelling calls "true theism" (or later, "monotheism"); it is the view that I am here labeling panentheism. . . [a] free God . . . freely self-unfolding, and hence involved in the process of becoming.[3]

Humans exist, dogs and stars exist, even time exists—but if God is not a human confection, then God cannot simply exist over against and outside of all other beings. Rather, all things have their being in God. God—in all things; God—beyond all things. It was never possible to perceive God directly, for God is the ground of the power of our perceiving. The eye cannot examine itself! Tillich makes the point in this way.

> Natural theology tried to derive theological affirmations from the analysis of man's finitude. This is an impossible task. None of the conclusions which argue for the existence of God is valid. Their validity extends as far as the questioning analysis, not beyond. For God is manifest only through God.[4]

It may seem awkwardly elementary in a paper of this kind to state that the objects of faith are not available as facts. As a pastoral matter, however, lay people still need to hear this. For a person who thinks all Christians are caught up in theistic fantasies, there is no way forward in faith without hearing these negative statements about the impossibility of apprehending God directly. They are the beginning of the gospel for such a hearer, who needs encouragement to distinguish between cognitive knowledge and the possibility of revealed knowledge; who further needs to hear that it is acceptable "to stand in the congregation" even though she has *not* had experiences that seem to correspond with the formulations of Christian doctrine. For the sake of the possibility of salvation itself, these elementary affirmations need to be proclaimed. They will expose the essential challenge of faith, too, namely, that an individual *cannot* undertake simply "to have faith" or to understand it. "For God is manifest only through God." Nevertheless, with these negations, the one who stands outside the circle of faith may see that faithful people understand her standing her ground, unwilling to accept the limited, finite notion of a God who supposedly acts upon the world from outside it. She can see that no one condemns her for having no faith in such an object. This too is the beginning of the gospel, and an essential moment in the story of salvation.

The hearer we have in mind might wonder whether facts of any order can shed light upon what Christians say that God has done in Jesus Christ. Many scholars in pursuit of the historical Jesus have spaded up objective data about the culture and concerns of Jesus' time, but contemporary records of the man Jesus do not exist. He is not available as a fact in the ordinary sense. A common conclusion from data about Jesus' land and times is that the Christ of the church

was developed from a simple cloth, Jesus of Nazareth, by men with an agenda quite different from Jesus'. John Dominic Crossan[5], for example, uses a rigorous method in analysis of ancient texts to argue that Jesus was driven by a passion for radical hospitality toward all. Such historical approaches offer plausible accounts of what a video camera might have recorded long ago, and they can stir the reader's imagination with a humanistic vision for what the authors think Jesus cared about. But the historical quest for Jesus fails to account for a Christian's experience of new life in Jesus Christ, or the testimony of the church, or the power of its symbols to mediate regenerated life. At best, the historical portraits of Jesus show him as the object of unintentional distortion by creative minds at opportune times. Their facts do not throw light on what Christ's salvation might be.

The sole data of Jesus that *are* facts are those concerning the *reception* of him as Savior. These are 1) the existence of the Christian church and its Bible through nearly two millennia and 2) the fact that through the ministries of the church, Christians have laid claim to an experience of well-being they call "new life" or "regeneration" or, sometimes, "salvation." These are facts in the ordinary sense; reasonable observers agree that these phenomena have occurred, regardless of their judgments about the testimonies themselves. There are no others. Christian teachers can bless this alienated world when they openly show that they do *not* consider the Bible a repository of facts essential to faith. Tillich offers these points:

> The concrete biblical material is not guaranteed by faith in respect to empirical factuality; but it is guaranteed as an adequate expression of the transforming power of the New Being in Jesus as the Christ. Only in this sense does faith guarantee the biblical picture of Jesus. And it can be shown that, in all periods in the history of the church, it was this picture which created both the church and the Christian, and not a hypothetical description of what may lie behind the biblical picture. . . . Participation, not historical argument, guarantees the reality of the event upon which Christianity is based. It guarantees a personal life in which the New Being has conquered the old being. But it does not guarantee his name to be Jesus of Nazareth. Historical doubt concerning the existence of the life of someone with this name cannot be overruled. He might have had another name. (This is an historically absurd, but logically necessary, consequence of the historical method.) [6]

Now, the rise of the church and the formation of the New Testament witness appear as facts of history within larger historical frameworks; in particular, the Christian witness to Jesus arose *within* Jewish and Israelite history; and the testimonies of Israel to divine power arose in turn *within* the astonishing unfolding of reason, law, and consciousness underway more or less simultaneously in cultures across the world. Consider these two developments more closely.

The brevity of the earthly sojourn of *homo sapiens* astounds even the casual student of paleontology. Powerful lizards held this ground for several hundreds of millions of years, yet in the blink of twenty or thirty thousand years, humans have acquired a formidable sense of permanent residence and dominance on the planet. Only in the last 10,000 years did this creature organize stable communities and begin to record an account of existence. During this sliver of time, the physical processes of human and other living organisms changed hardly at all, and those of inorganic beings not at all, but human consciousness underwent a tornado of development inside its stable vessel of flesh. Evolution has undergone a revolution in the human mind. To stay connected with our informed and skeptical hearer, our account of salvation must keep conversation with science' account *both* of the eons of time through which human salvation was irrelevant *and* of the radical changes loosed just yesterday inside the cranium of our species. Are these facts part of the story of salvation? James Gustafson has laid out the seriousness of this claim for pastoral theology.

> Theologians, pastors, and everyone else now live in a culture in which we are daily exposed to alternative accounts of the same actions, events, and other phenomena—that is, we live in a culture that evokes what for decades was

> called "cognitive dissonance." One can only guess whether and how much this cognitive dissonance between the language of non-theological disciplines and theological and religious discourse used in preaching and pastoral activity poses spiritual, moral, and theological quandaries in the minds of participants in church life. For at least some it does. It is surely a cause of disaffection from Christian churches on the part of many persons, both young and old. They find secular accounts to be sufficient. This project is important pastorally insofar as both clergy and other participants in church life confront and are concerned about the dissonance between naturalistic explanations of actions and their religious significance or insignificance.[7]

Only during the last third of civilization's ten or twelve thousand years did humans grasp their experience of being in such a manner that they could reflect on it as an object and pass their conclusions on to descendants by means of symbols and texts. This opening of language and thought upon the field of experience began more or less simultaneously in many separate cultures across the globe. Some historians term this "the axial age," (700-200 BCE) for it is as if human development suddenly turned on an axis of wholly new awareness for self, other, and the divine Other. Whatever symbols were employed prior to this "axial age" to convey the meaning of experience did not meet the needs of subsequent generations, which continuously discarded what they received—until this fertile age in which both the human predicament and the human prospect were conceived in terms that would serve humankind well down to this day and perhaps for thousands of years to come.

In *The Battle for God*, Karen Armstrong writes about essential unities in knowledge, wisdom, and consciousness that evolved "in the cities and empires of the Axial Age."

> Citizens were acquiring a wider perspective and broader horizons, which made the old local cults seem limited and parochial. . . . The most sensitive were troubled by the social injustice that seemed built into the agrarian society. Consequently, prophets and reformers arose who insisted that the virtue of compassion was crucial to spiritual life: to see sacredness in every single human being . . . became the test of authentic piety. In this way, during the Axial Age, the great confessional faiths that have continued to guide human beings sprang up in the civilized world: Buddhism and Hinduism in the East, Confucianism and Taoism in the Far East; monotheism in the Middle East; and rationalism in Europe. Despite their major differences . . . they all built on the old traditions to evolve the idea of a single, universal transcendence; they cultivated an internalized spirituality, and stressed the importance of practical compassion.[8]

Are what we have called the "facts" of Christianity related to this phenomenon of worldwide spiritual evolution? Although no answer to this question can be called a fact, nevertheless, an effort to make sense of the phenomenon of development—of becoming—is required if Christian salvation is to have a hearing in the modern mind Gustafson describes above. Two errors, at the extremes of literalism and liberalism, hold great sway in American society. The literalist error is to refuse the possibility that "Christ" is one name among others for the experience of the event of God's saving work. This is an error because it limits the freedom of God to work in time and space. The "liberalist" error, described at the beginning of this paper, presupposes continuing salutary development of the human as an automatic characteristic of the program of existence. This kind of universalism also limits the freedom of God, who is required to be a force of love from which divine initiative and justice are absent. The first error assumes that its portrait of God's work is complete because its revelatory source is perfect, without taint of human error; the second assumes it can deduce God's nature on its own, and that revelation is an erroneous construct.

By taking reasonable account of the lightning speed of the evolution of human consciousness, Christian theology can pass between these two errors. We can make sense of the existing world as unfolding in the sovereignty of God without putting the rest of humanity in the wrong and while keeping full conversation with the sciences. The questing, modern, wakeful mind demands an open mind on these questions as an earnest of spiritual wisdom. Here, then, is a proposal: What Christians experience and name as God's regenerative power in Christ is of one piece with divine

creativity in all dimensions of existence through all time. God is in all things, able—not required, but able—to reveal Godself in any things. This proposal affirms the absolute freedom of God. It takes nothing from the Christian doctrine of revelation, that God chooses to show Godself in a manner which fallible, limited humans can experience as relating to their predicament, and closing their wounds. Within this panentheist theology of God, it makes sense that Christians' reports of the *meaning* for themselves of "salvation through Christ" resemble the reports of religious well-being in other religious traditions. The fact that all refer to experiences of dynamic growth or transformation in the knowledge of God, self, and other is cause for joy and celebration, rather than the anxiety or defensiveness that attach to traditional theistic fantasies of God who literally "sends the Son" from a heavenly dwelling to go down and be with the humans for a space. A panentheist understanding of God's initiative can affirm with full meaning the fourth evangelist's declaration that the Word was "in the beginning" with God, and *is* God. We need not resist with contortions of logic the idea that the experience of grace-filled well-being, which Christians call salvation, long precedes the advent of Jesus in Galilee and Judea, and can appear at God's initiative without the presence of the symbol of Christ. We realize we are ready to learn what God is doing from anything and anyone, and to ascribe to Christ—because that is how *we* were called—this astonishing freedom of being and openness. The experience is of "God—afoot within the universe, and everything, everything is One," as a recently penned hymn of the church puts it. In fact, we discover that our own experience of salvation has yet much more light to be shed in it as we open to the possibility—the proposal— that the one whom we call Christ has been revealed wherever God chooses since humans began recording their awe of God's presence. Consider Israel and the Judaism of the late ancient period, into which Jesus was born.

This paper cannot but commend to the reader's reflection how fully Israel's account of its salvation-history cooperates with the world-historical development of spiritual consciousness reviewed above. Consider aged Abraham's realization that "in [him] all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Gen 12.3) Our attention is focused here on Israel's experience of the Exile, beginning in 587 BCE, a development squarely situated in the Axial Age. To evaluate how to teach "what Jesus has done for us," we need to frame what Israel did for Jesus.

Upon the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, nearly five thousand persons (Jer 52.30) were exiled to Babylon and lost their accustomed symbolic means of access to God. According to various psalms of the Hebrew Bible, they experienced confusion about their identity as a people. Their elegant written tradition, which codified their sense of divine favor and calling, beginning with Abraham and extending forever—as they supposed—through David's line, seemed now to have been inscribed in error. Nevertheless, a critical mass of individuals within the exiled leadership accepted an interpretation of their disasters as the intentional acts of Yahweh, and therefore good acts, meant for the benefit of the people. This interpretation, offered by prophets with peculiar mantic power, and preserved as written texts by a convicted and transformed leadership circle, was the only vessel that could hold and sustain the flame of belief in Yahweh through such an ordeal. Consider the alternative: whoever experienced the Exile as a breach of the divine promise, or merely as evil and meaningless, would have been constrained by internal logic to abandon the Yahweh cult for another. This option to experiment with deities was normative for ancient Mesopotamians.

Those who chose to wait upon the LORD through the ordeal had to re-work their hypotheses about the nature of God, self, and others. In the terms of our original argument above, they had to become

suspicious with regard to their (previous) thought about God, and try out new, provisional thought about God—thought that would be *subject to falsification by experiment*. Was God accessible through means other than priestly practices fixed exclusively in the Jerusalem temple? Had the felt promises of God ever signify that God was interested in their welfare more than that of other nations? Was God more concerned for the welfare of the wretched of the earth than they had been? Might the people learn to trust God and God's promise even if Israel's national fortunes never again rose high above the horizon of history? Could God's blessing, refuge, and righteousness be known in spite of, or through, suffering? Could suffering become the occasion for new consciousness of the beauty of God afoot within the universe, and of all that is in creation?

The post-exilic writings of the Hebrew Bible comprise an anthology of responses to these questions of practical theology. Beginning with Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Deutero-Isaiah, and raised to a chorus of praise by the wisdom literature and Ruth and Jonah, these voices answered the existential questions about the human predicament with resounding affirmation for the possibility of experiencing salvation as union with God, with self, and with other humans, and even other objects, in ways that transcended salvation interpreted as rescue from suffering. This knowledge of God's blessing can be thought of as an inward science, a category of beauty or vision requiring no material facts as evidence of good things divinely done "for us," and no personal or national power or prestige. Neither oneself nor one's nation was any longer presupposed as the center of God's attention. To the contrary, "It is too light a thing that you should . . . restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." (Isaiah 49.6) Indeed, the blessing that God confers upon those who love God takes the form of realizing that God is *not* for me or for us, as once thought. The "us" comprised by God's eye, as the believer imagines that visioning eye, grows greater and larger, breaking preconceptions. Even Jonah was left uncondemned alongside his withered bush to contemplate the saved city of Nineveh, and thus to be saved himself in his contemplation. The last sentence of that story is the LORD's hanging question, "And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" (Jonah 4.11) To see this was salvation for the blessed lover of God.

A conflicting voice was also recorded in the post-exilic period, however. We would call this a "conservative" or fundamentalist argument today, for it hearkens back *ad fontes* to supposed foundational certainties of an earlier time. All the Chronicler's writings, some psalms, as well as Esther and I-IV Maccabees record claims and hopes that Israel will rise again to material and political dominance by God's hand—all this done "for us," the chosen people at the center of God's concern. Here, knowledge of God was a science of his external manifestations of power in history, as if God would leap into the world of facts and stand for all to see in the eye of flesh.

Through five centuries after the Exile down to Jesus' day, Judaism took root and matured. Its people participated in God's continuing self-disclosure. Their spiritual development, and that of other peoples, was not automatic. On the contrary, their resistance to new ways of understanding God's promise was strong, yet even their resistance was ultimately part of their growth and development. Thus, Israel's journey went by a particular path at a peculiar gait, marked by its unique interpretation of national grief as the occasion for new relationship with the Divine. This interpretation intensely clarified their identity as a people. Their particular telling of their story literally formed their boundary with distinct values—among which was that the people would re-tell their story in a new way if it would help them hold to God. Had their experience of God not been

their ultimate concern, they would have held only to their old stories, without reinterpretation, and they would dissolved like every other small tribe overwhelmed by great empires. Instead, they asked, *Who is 'we,' really, and what are we here for?*

When Jesus' life story unfolded within this national practice of debate and reinterpretation over blessing and salvation, Judaism's spiritual and intellectual sensitivity to suffering and identity provided the lens through which a critical mass of practiced story-tellers was able, by the grace of God, to see Jesus as God's long-awaited response to the question of salvation. As we noted above, Israel's great post-exilic poets, Deutero-Isaiah and the poet of *Job*, had broken through the veil of the nation's anxiety about its identity and purpose. Having internalized the nation's grief as personal suffering; and having given sublime voice to their personal experience of light and salvation within such suffering; and having thus provided a language and practices by means of which any individual might prepare to have his and her own experience of suffering transformed into light, these poets' words opened the possibility for some Jews of Jesus' day to receive the symbols of Jesus' life and death and resurrection as mediating eternal power for the transformation and transmutation of all suffering and evil, including all the consequences of the predicament of human finitude—sin, guilt, ignorance, ambiguity, and the fear of death. The development of Israel's consciousness in the Axial Age potentiated the radical further development of transcendence, experienced as salvation, far beyond the circle of the tribe of Abraham. This is what Israel did for Jesus, so to speak.

To this point, we have argued that an adequate account for the report of developing consciousness in individuals and cultures across several thousand years of history is that God is revealing Godself in this development. Revelation is not only the telos of creation; revelation is what creation is up to. God is *in* the "becoming" process. Far from the theistic objectification of God as a being who makes plans and acts them out on objects external to himself (an idea irreparably frayed by the insights of rationalism in the last four centuries), God becomes what God is through continual self-revelation. Clayton expresses the idea this way:

> The pair of terms ("ground" and "result") best expresses the two sides of divinity: God's position "above" creation and God's intimate involvement with it. God is the ground of being for finite beings; can God also be the ground of change in such a way that he incorporates the resulting changes? Or will all change be external to God as in certain strands of traditional theism? Clearly, the change that finite beings undergo must in the end be grounded in God. If becoming is . . . real, then one must also locate *its* ground in God and God must participate in becoming as well. Indeed, becoming must be understood as a dimension of God. Where [God's] self-manifestation takes place within the finite [dimension], and to finite agents . . . this must imply a temporal process. [9]

Accepting that God is so free, Christian faith can undergo a crucifixion-resurrection of scope, depth, and relevance as it abandons theistic foundationalism, special providence, and literalism of every stripe, and is left, like Job, like Jesus of the Cross, with nothing but the self before the Eternal, graced with the gift of seeing what God is revealing. Now, this theological approach cannot establish the ground for faith, so the skeptic, for whom this argument has carefully distinguished facts from revelation, cannot simply pass over into the experience of revelation, as the argument now does. And yet, this passing over into the ground of revelation cannot but be somewhat attractive to the rational skeptic, for we have left the factual ground with much in agreement: that God's attributes are not discernible or deducible from facts or nature; that the eye of the flesh can see only what is present to the flesh; that God is not inserting God's will here and there in history to re-direct the course of some events; that Christian teaching need not attach any fault to those who do not see God or Jesus as Christians do. "I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world." (John 12.47)

However, this is the point of Christian invitation. Since the examination of facts is exhausted, a different kind of knowledge must be under consideration. Schelling said, "Reason must be in some sense left behind." [10] Those who trust knowledge based in experience of the phenomenal world owe a hearing to the claims of the faithful that revelation is also based in experience, for, like the dedicated scientists of any discipline, faith asks those who want to know something through "contemplative reason" (H.R. Niebuhr) to do three things: 1) learn the injunctions proper to this discipline; 2) experience the results of practicing the injunctions; and 3) bring a report of experiences back to the community which is practicing this form of reason, expecting both to learn and to reshape the community's knowledge and its injunctions. These principles are at the heart of what is called the scientific method. However, they serve the development of all forms of knowledge, and they have been in use in the contemplative and divine sciences for long ages.[11]

Christian tradition calls the knowledge grounded in contemplative reason *revelation*. Unfortunately, this latter term has so often been equated with the scriptural texts that it has come to be associated with irrational beliefs that are *not* subject to the three-step method for testing knowledge identified above, or to any kind of re-telling and re-thinking under the guidance of God. In direct contradiction of that tendency, pastoral theology needs to claim that whatever aspects of the scriptural record correspond wholly with mere facts are, by definition, not the content of revelation. H.R. Niebuhr wrote:

> We cannot point to Scriptures saying that what we mean can be known if men will but read what is there written. We must read the law with the mind of the prophets and the prophets with the eyes of Jesus; we must immerse ourselves with Paul in the story of the crucifixion, and read Paul with the aid of the Spirit in the church, if we find revelation in the Scriptures.[12]

The experience of revelation—the confidence that one is, as it were, seeing the divine self-unfolding—raises one's consciousness beyond itself. The self transcends itself, and knows that it is not itself the cause or ground of this new power of seeing. Not every experience of altered consciousness serves as, or deserves to be heeded as, revelation. This is why the mutual dependency of individual and community cannot be severed. "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God." (1 John 4:1) Each individual receives from a community the symbols (words, acts, images) which can mediate the meaning of revelatory experiences; sometimes the individual uses the received symbols in new ways, and a given community responds, positively or negatively, to the altered form of communication. But even when an individual says nothing of a revelatory experience to anyone, the community has still been involved in and present to the process of potentiating the revelatory experience.

In the instance of revelation mediated through the symbol of "Jesus Christ, Savior," awareness of self-transcendence is what salvation is. It is "in Christ" because the symbol of Jesus Christ provides the means by which an individual re-interprets her life and story as resolved, in spite of the limitations of finitude. By contrast, the theory that salvation is conferred only on those who believe certain notions about Jesus cannot mediate the *experience* of salvation as revelation. Such a theory can, however, satisfy the ego's hunger to remain itself, unchanged; the convenient rubrics of doctrinal theory provide a constant temptation to the ego to cease from the quest for revelation on the belief that one's own conversion and development has been fully completed. This is not to say that doctrinal statements about how salvation works are irrelevant to the process that makes revelatory experience possible, not least because the experience of self-transcendence compels communication. *Something* must be said and done with the experience, though nothing can directly transfer the beauty of revelation to others. It is not a fact. Because the beauty of divine self-

revelation cannot be captured or possessed, all symbols at the disposal of contemplative reason function as metaphors or myths. This is inescapable. Still, the desire to share this beauty, and to call others to the possibility of new being and new action is so strong that the desire to communicate the new experience of self could be shown to be the motive in the formulation of sound doctrine. It is an *imitatio Dei*.

What has Jesus Christ done for us? Of course, we acknowledge that all our ideas on this subject are metaphors and symbols, and that their truth is a function of their fruits. This understanding of revelation continually provokes and disturbs the mind of the faithful on the question whether the will or action of God has yet been understood as God is revealing it, or will reveal it. Niebuhr calls revelation "the conversion and permanent revolution of our human religion through Jesus Christ."[13] Those who acknowledge no foundational authority in their own scriptures discover advantages for their proclamation of God's truth, for when they are clear with others that they do not consider the acceptance of their sacred texts as a prerequisite of faithful conversation, those outside the circle of faith can listen to the words and observe the works of the church, undistracted by the heat of ideological condemnation. Far more than that, this permanent revolution of our human religion through Jesus Christ means that salvation is accomplished by the peculiar gift of dying to oneself and being regenerated in renewing, evolving, and transforming consciousness. The Buddhist Masao Abe, who dedicated decades to dialogue with Christians, said that Christian conversion and Buddhist awakening agree "in so far as the death of the human ego is essential to salvation."[14]

In his life and death and resurrection, Jesus Christ enacts the eternal self-emptying, self-giving work of God, which arises for humans as self-transcendent consciousness, communion, and love—in permanent revolution against human religion. Jesus of Nazareth is called the Christ by revelation when contemplative reason sees in this person the beauty and consequence of God's self-offering as relevant to oneself. It does not matter how Jesus conceived his work on earth or his destiny; Jesus does not have to have thought his job was "Savior" for his symbol to work for salvation in the will of God. Many scriptural passages suggest at least a gentle ambiguousness in Jesus, not to say confusion, about his messianic self-understanding. Indeed, the conscious intentions of Biblical authors as they wrote their texts cannot be said to exhaust the revelatory meanings in those texts; we are not after "original intent." Thus, the door is open to reflect on any spiritual path as a path of Christ, without condescension. In Jesus Christ, we have seen and experienced what God is doing from beginning to end—"breaking down the dividing wall," "drawing all," "that they may be one," "that the earth may be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea." Christ Jesus is how we have seen this; this seeing is what salvation is. In him, we can die to our self and to our religion *so that* we can see clearly now that others perceive the beauty of the divine as well as we, sometimes better, and that others know "salvation," though they have never known Jesus Christ through their contemplative reason, and never will. By the grace of God in Christ, we experience the revelation that "spiritual awareness is designed by God to become our normal awareness."[15] This is what salvation is. Finally, it has no contents, needs no theories, relies on no promises of satisfaction for hungers experienced in the flesh, leans on nothing—and leans on Nothing, who reveals and gives himself as life where two bare sticks had crossed, leading up and down, leading out and in, to all corners of creation. "Morning by morning, *new mercies I see.* All I have needed, Thy hand hath provided." This is salvation.

Endnotes

1. "The Second Coming," W.B. Yeats

2. Clayton, Phillip. *The Problem of God in Modern Thought* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000) p. 449

3. Ibid., p. 480

4. Tillich, Paul. *Systematic Theology, Vol. 2* (Chicago: Harper and Row, 1967) p.14

5. Crossan, John Dominic. *The Historical Jesus : The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (New York: Harper SanFrancisco, 1993)

6. Tillich, Vol 2., p. 114-115

7. Gustafson, James. *An Examined Faith: The Grace of Self-Doubt* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004) p. 9

8. Armstrong, Karen. *The Battle for God* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2000) p. xiv

9. Clayton, p. 482

10. Clayton, p. 508

11. I am indebted to Ken Wilber for the observation. See *The Eye of Spirit* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001) pp. 76-86

12. Niebuhr, H.R. *The Meaning of Revelation.* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1941, 1960) p. 37

13. Ibid., p. 139

14. Quoted in Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Christian Spirituality* (Westminster Press: Philadelphia, 1983) p. 96

15. Keating, Thomas. *The Human Condition* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999) p. 31